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Religion and American Popular Culture: An Introductory Essay

Catherine L. Albanese

DECIDING WHAT IS popular seems easy enough. It is what everybody (mostly) likes or has heard about, what people are currently doing, wearing, eating, feeling. Our word *popular* derives from a Latin word, *populus*, which means “the people.” So what is popular is what is “of the people”; it is what is, as the dictionary says in one meaning, “frequently encountered or widely accepted” (Webster). Finding the popular in a scholarly context, however, is not so easy. To evoke an “American popular culture” seems to imply an opposite—an American *unpopular* culture?—against which the popular can be sited and measured. And to suggest that religion is somehow implicated in the production of the popular is to nod toward that other thorny growth among academic problems regarding it—the meaning of popular religion.

Charles H. Long is helpful here in situating the cultural discourse out of which notions of popular religion initially arose in the West. They came, he tells us, out of Enlightenment conversations that throve on the “discovery” of difference—between European “civilization” and other “primitive” societies; and then, within European national borders, between educated elites and the “peasants” or the “folk.” So, as the work of Long suggests, there was in the philosophical celebration of the popular something of a

displaced desire for "archaic roots," a longing for beginnings and fresh starts when cultural energy was high (442-443).

History, however, is only partly destiny, and the history of the cognitive category of popular religion is no exception. By the late twentieth century, the category has become complexly tangled with other definitional proposals. Romantic searches for the archaic are often countered by assertions of difference from/dominion over domestic "primitives" (e.g., Elzey) with the searchers and asserters none other than our academic selves. But even this is to suggest too much unanimity. The meanings of popular religion have become multiple, and—at least initially—they do not all move in the same direction.

Long himself identified seven significant meanings for the term, and he went on, discursively, to suggest an eighth in his treatment of grassroots revolutionary movements (444-449). Other scholars have also not been shy of suggestion. Indeed, the search for the archaic has continued in covert fashion for scholars who subsume the popular under the rubric of the "folk." Robert Redfield provides a classic example in his distinction between "great" and "little" traditions. Perhaps less romantically, Don Yoder—in a survey of the history of the term *folk religion*—has opted for a definition that encompasses all of the religious belief and behavior not incorporated into official ecclesiastical forms. Here, then, the "folk" shades off into the "unofficial."

Meanwhile, the cue about unofficialdom has been accepted by a number of scholars. For Peter W. Williams, for example, popular religion is sociologically inflected as "extra-ecclesiastical symbolic activity." It is practiced "outside the formal structures provided by most societies for such activity" because the structures have become inadequate. But it is also practiced there by nonelites who do not have sophisticated philosophical or theological alternatives (228). Thus, it becomes a religious formation set off—by the academic observer?—from elite engagement. And for Charles H. Lippy, who cites Williams approvingly, popular religion is reconstituted as "popular religiosity"—a formation that includes a "central zone" of religious symbolizations touching base with official religion but also "subsidiary zones" containing a lot more. Popular religiosity is characterized by a penchant for religious blending or combination and by a "lack of order and organization." It is characterized, too, by a "sense of the supernatural as it empowers ordinary people" (3, 9-11, 18).

Thus, as if in corroboration of Long's generalizations about Enlightenment discourse on "primitivity" and "civilization," all of these definitions hint of a sub rosa recognition of the domestic "primitive"—to be praised, critiqued, or simply described. Moreover, five of Long's own initial seven definitions echo his original assessment. Popular religion, he writes, has

been understood as folk religion, as lay religion in contradistinction from that of the clergy, and as esoteric forms of belief and behavior found usually "in the lower strata of a society." Popular religion has also been seen as "the religion of a subclass or minority group in a culture" and as "the religion of the masses in opposition to the religion of the sophisticated, discriminating, and learned within a society" (445-446). A sixth definition in Long's tally inverts the "primitive" designation, so that popular religion becomes the creation of elites with hegemonic goals and intentions (446).

Finally, a seventh definition—actually Long's third (445)—points toward what, in the American context, Will Herberg long ago called the "American Way of Life." This is the "common religion" that, in Herberg's words, "is, at bottom, a spiritual structure, a structure of ideas and ideals, of aspirations and values, of beliefs and standards; [which] synthesizes all that commends itself to the American as the right, the good, and the true in actual life" (74-75). Long calls it a "kind of civil religion or religion of the public" (445), and his subsequent discussion shows that he understands its American expression to involve those who are prominent as well as those who are ordinary.

Such conflation of prominent with *hoi polloi* seems a promising strategy for extricating scholars from mental thickets inhabited by "primitive" ghosts. Some of the recent scholarship on popular religion has taken it. The civil-religion discourse of the late sixties and early seventies provided a beginning, to be sure, in the memorable work of Robert Bellah (1967) and others, including Herberg himself. But I refer here to different discourses that have dissolved the "primitive" by dissolving the very notion of the popular. By the early eighties, for instance, Natalie Zemon Davis, writing of the European context, was invoking what she called "religious cultures." Her religious-cultures approach intended to sidestep issues regarding definition and to focus instead on "interconnected beliefs and practises" [sic] that were "contextual," "comparative," and also "relational" (322-323).

Even more directly, Leonard Norman Primiano has banished popular in favor of what he calls "vernacular" religion. Vernacular religion, for Primiano, is "religion as it is lived," religion "as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it." All religion, he tells us, involves interpretation, and so it is "impossible for the religion of an individual not to be vernacular" (40-44, esp. 44). Beyond that, Primiano's reading of the religious vernacular is decidedly individualistic and, in fact, points consistently toward "uniculture," his own term for the "personal discourse which we all carry on with ourselves as self-aware beings." Vernacular religion becomes its expression—an instance of the "processual

system of conscious and unconscious knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs particular to the individual" (49-50).

These provide the foundation for everyday life, which is surely a promising site for discovering popular religion or its successor. Here, though, the Primiano vernacular greatly benefits from the introduction of a more communal model. In this context, the sociological concerns of the civil-religion discourse seem appropriate but nuanced, with Primiano, in a different key. Just as the "vernacular" is most precisely a description of language and just as language is the shared property of a collective, vernacular religion seems most fruitfully read as the appropriated belief- and life-ways of a group of people. They "speak" the same religious language. They are a religious discourse community because of strong elements of mutuality in their background and/or present situation. So be it.

On the other hand, the older civil-religion discourse and Herberg's American Way of Life suggest a kind of sociological explosion out of what we normally consider to be community and into what might be more usefully described as "mass" or "the masses." Conditions of modernity and postmodernity have eroded and openly assaulted the small and intimate cultural enclaves that most powerfully figure the *Gemeinschaft* ideal. A burgeoning state bureaucracy, though, is only a symptom of larger processes of growth and change. Once again, Charles Long is helpful. Seeking to decipher the meaning of the popular and the common thread among his seven definitions of it, he tells us that they have two elements in common. The first is the "mode of transmission of culture," which is universalizing. The second is the kind of knowing that universalization brings (447).

The transmission of culture in our time and place is dominated by print and electronic media, and they afford an "intensity" to the communication and an "ephemerality" to its content that change the form in which culture comes. To say that religion is popular becomes a way of saying that it is "embedded in a system of signs rather than in symbols and archetypes." "From this point of view," Long concludes, "the modes of communication and transmission have as much or more to do with the integration and wholeness of the culture as the content of symbolic clusters or ideological meaning." Spelled out concretely, the formula means that traditions can no longer function as the givers of power and endurance to religious form and that the burden has shifted to human experience (447) and the text-like signs in which it habitually becomes encoded. So the expressers and purveyors of personal experience—the print and electronic media that "semiotinize" it—achieve a special cogency as religious agents and spaces. Students of religion need to pay strenuous attention to them.

This is to leave us precisely where we need to be—at the threshold of the present collection of essays and reviews. Indeed, there is a seeming conspiracy of unity among them. No one of them tries overtly to define the popular in popular religion. Yet each of them implicitly subscribes to the same operative definition. For these essays and reviews, the popular is the product of mass culture especially as it is mediated by, in, and through print and electronic sources. This is surely extra-ecclesiastical religion, but that becomes hardly noteworthy as the burden of these pieces unfolds. What preoccupies is not identification of the unofficial nature of the proceedings nor judgment regarding, in Wayne Elzey's words, "bizarre confections of the sacred and the profane, mistakes that should not have happened" (1727). The authors of these essays and reviews do not situate themselves as so many academic voyeurs. Instead, as a group, they register as participants in the popular religious culture they describe.

David Chidester begins by noticing a religious suggestiveness evoked by producers and participants in the culture of baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock music. He does so to argue his case for a multiplicity of analytic models for studying the presence of religion in popular culture and for contemplating the power of metaphorical transference in the construction of theory. He writes as if he at least knows baseball fans intimately, has paused to refresh with Coca-Cola, and has listened, in his time, to rock music. When he levels criticism, it is not to disdain popular culture from the Olympian heights of superior knowledge or taste. Instead, Chidester levels his criticism at the academy itself.

If there is metaphorical sleight of hand in the appropriation, by the denizens of popular culture, of the term *religion*, the technique is also old habit in the academy. Chidester's own article rests ostensibly on the academic "habit" of "primitive-civilized" discourse—even, ironically, using classic research on the potlatch that is now subject to revisionism, at least among contemporary scholars of the Tlingit (D'Arbanville; Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer; Kan 1986, 1989). But Chidester effectively undercuts his hermeneutic by the leveling dynamic of his rhetorical strategy. His "us" and "them" come very close to being a "we."

Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle are as intent as Chidester on media-promoted phenomena in their revisitation of civil religion. Their Girardian analysis of the blood sacrifices of nationalism avidly pursues media questions, seeing the media as functioning, in fact, the way that authoritative sacred texts have done in traditional religions. All religions organize "killing energy," they tell us, and nationalism is no exception.

Marvin's and Ingle's psychological perspective echoes the older theological insights of Herbert Richardson, who called war a "civil ritual" and identified "human sacrifice in warfare" as the "basic cultic rite of civil reli-

gion." "Today we no longer sacrifice our children to nature," Richardson wrote, "but we feed them to the state" (174). But the Marvin-Ingle reflection on these themes inflects them in terms of the violent secret that René Girard has classically explored. And the Marvin-Ingle reflection also subverts the us-and-them of academic "primitive-civilized" discourse in the announcement of collective sin or secret.

The mass religion of the electronic church points us, inevitably, toward the computer. Here the "mode of transmission" has advanced significantly beyond the modern mode that was common to the middle twentieth century. Hence, Stephen O'Leary raises a series of "potentially troubling" questions based on the work of Walter Ong. The computer is like both print and speech, O'Leary reminds us, and cyberspace *may* be the space of revolution. He goes on to provide an example of neopagan ritualism on computer networks, with believer-participants celebrating nature by plugging into web sites and rooms that become electronic temples of worship.

Long's observations about semiotics and systems of signs come to mind again, too, as O'Leary explores the textually driven world of the cyber-rituals he has found. And if Marvin and Ingle worry in their piece over the chilling seriousness of "killing energy," O'Leary is faced with what to do with irreverence. Cyberspace ritual joins reverence to fun, combines religious elements bizarrely, and is everywhere faced with its own evidence of constructedness. So there is little to separate the virtual ritualists of the Internet from their academic observers. Nobody in the neopagan electronic rooms that O'Leary has entered would object if he sipped virtual or real wine or suggested to subscribers that they were making their religion up.

In fact, as Brenda E. Brasher insists, we are all really cyborgs. What she means is that the boundary between biology and technology has been so eroded that we can no longer see or understand ourselves without, so to speak, our artificial "organs" and "limbs." And in yet another reminder of the work of Charles Long, her cyborg stands as a "metaphor of cultural semiotics." Moreover, she finds early Christian texts of little help in mediating a religion to fit the new electronic context. New religious movements, she tells us, are most at home with computer networks because they are "untethered from ancient texts," a proposition that supports O'Leary's neopagan researches.

Even more, though, Brasher sees the space vacated by traditional religions as increasingly inhabited by the religion of popular culture. In language suggesting the vernacular religion of Primiano or even the far-heard Sheilaism of Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985: 221, 235),

she argues that people construct their own tailor-made "form of religion" from the image presentations of mass-mediated culture. The upshot is that the American religious marketplace includes "a plethora of distinct popular culture faiths." And Brasher is preeminently a participant in what she studies. The cyborg, she tells us, incorporates dualism and challenges old Western habits of separating us and them. "It is I, a cyborg," who writes, Brasher reminds us.

Probably, Oren Baruch Stier would not disagree. His review of the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Beit Hashoah-Museum of Tolerance calls the museum to task because, in its fascination with virtual reality, its representation of the Holocaust forgets Jewish tradition. Themes of high technology and multi-media are uppermost again, so that religion in popular culture becomes, as in the other pieces, a mass culture phenomenon. Stier's careful evocation of the nineteenth-century museum—with its displaced artifacts and fictive narrations—raises compelling questions about the manipulation of public memory. Even more problematic for Stier, without artifacts on which to construct its narrative the Wiesenthal presumes to teach visitors how to think. So there is no "memory work" at all, and visitors become alternately players in interactive media games and passive voyeurs.

There are hardly even two cheers for the computer and virtual reality here. But Stier the critic has had to coexist with Stier the participant in order to represent the work of the museum. Stier is part of the museum-going public become self-conscious—a Jew himself and one who cannot remain indifferent to the quality of the common culture that is shared.

Nor can Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite remain indifferent to the media as she reviews Mark Silk's *Unsecular Media*. Hers, again, is an engaged response, the work of someone who regularly meets the press in print and electronic forms. The picture that emerges of Silk's work through the Thistlethwaite reading is one in which technology effectively shapes what can be known. More than that, Thistlethwaite uses Silk's work—about a finite series of recurring themes and plot lines in religious news stories—to move beyond it. Sound-byte technology, she tells us, predisposes the electronic world to exploit the plot of polarization. Whereas newspapers have long honored a story line (or *topos*, to use Silk's preferred term) of tolerance, the electronic media carry no such heritage or inclination.

Thistlethwaite's review is in part a case study in beating the media at their own games, knowing their *topos* predilections ahead of time in order to replace damaging ones with substitutes or subverting plot lines altogether by skillful interpersonal contacts. What Thistlethwaite goes on, however, to suggest—and to agree with Silk about—is that, despite

decades of calling the media secular, the "form of religious reporting is itself religious." A *topos*, it turns out, is a sacred narration.

This is to bring us full circle. The form, we are reminded by Charles Long's work, is also universalizing; the mode of transmission and its epistemological results are what make the religiousness popular. More than that, if religion that is "popular" is better understood as religion that is vernacular, as Primiano has argued, then language itself becomes a clue to making sense of the popular. As a linguistic form, the vernacular is, we might say, in a broad sense always creole. That is, it always pieces and patches together its universe of meaning, appropriating terms, inflections, and structurations from numerous overlapping contexts and using them as so many ad hoc tools to order and express, to connect inner with outer, and to return to inner again. Against this backdrop, the mass culture rendition of popular religion becomes a dominating context shaping the emergence of religious vernaculars. Similarly, the print and electronic media that dominate the dominator become, taken together, a hegemonic host language in a creolizing speech situation (see Holm; Prothero:8).

To sum up, the media are mass language brokers and, so, mass culture brokers. And because even academics speak creole most, if not all, of the time, as these essays and reviews show, the domestic savages inhabiting print and electronic thickets include ourselves. In the end, Chidester's "potlatch" participants come back to haunt. If the media are implicated in the mass production of culture, there are expenditures and outlays involved that go beyond bare minimums. There is a conspiracy of giving here. The religion of popular culture—for all of its chronic moral ambiguities—is the gift that we, the members of a cyborg generation, give ourselves.

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